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Iran envoy admits receiving U.S. arms

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Iran's ambassador to the United Nations yesterday admitted that his country had received shipments of U.S.-made weapons, but he denied arms were traded for the release of American hostages in Beirut.

"We did not have any arms deal, or any other kind of deal, with regard to the release of the hostages, with the United States or anybody else," Ambassador Said Rajaie-Khorassani told a news conference in New York.

Separately, President Reagan and his top advisers got mixed reactions from key lawmakers attending an afternoon briefing on the reported arms deals that have sparked anger in Congress.

"My mind has not been changed," said Senate Democratic leader Robert Byrd, one of four lawmakers who attended the two-hour White House session.

Meanwhile, reports continued to surface of U.S. arms stockpiles in nations such as Spain and Italy awaiting shipment to Iran for use in that nation's six-year war with Iraq.

White House officials continued to decline comment, citing waning hopes for the release of additional Americans being held by pro-Iranian terrorists in Beirut.

Ambassador Rajaie-Khorassani left unclear whether the arms Iran received came through the U.S. government.

"We buy our armaments from the free market," he said. "Whether they are delivered directly by the United States on the basis of their debt to us or we just bought them and carried them home, as we have been doing for the past seven years, that is unclear to me."

But the administration reportedly arranged shipments of spare parts for Iran's aging fleet of U.S.-built jets and military transport planes that were purchased before the 1979 Islamic revolution. Several shipments apparently coincided with the release during the past year of three hostages, David Jacobsen, the Rev. Benjamin Weir and the Rev. Lawrence Martin Jenco.

The arms shipments and hostage releases have, in turn, been linked to clandestine attempts by the administration to restore diplomatic ties to Iran that were severed following the 1979 seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

Despite the furor over reports of an arms-hostage deal, a source close to the negotiations described the talks between the United States and Iran, held on and off for more than a year, as a positive step toward reducing Tehran's support for Islamic terrorist groups.

The talks focused on U.S. arms purchased by Iran during the reign of Shah Reza Pahlavi and impounded by the United States in 1979 after the nation's current leader, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, took control.

Arms shipments were tied to "changes in Iranian policy," not the release of American hostages held captive in Lebanon, said the source.

"We laid out our terms and they laid out theirs. It was bazaar diplomacy," said the source, likening the talks to a shopping expedition.

News accounts linking the U.S. arms sales directly to the release of American hostages were "fanciful," the source said, and the arms shipments involved were described as minor.

Former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane, who led attempts to re-establish contact with Iran, compared the effort with secret Nixon-era negotiations with China.

Mr. McFarlane urged current National Security Adviser John Poindexter on Tuesday to publicly disclose U.S. dealings with Iran.

White House officials, however, postponed disclosure for at least one week in the hope that at least two other hostages, Associated Press reporter Terry Anderson and educator Thomas Sutherland, would be freed, sources said.

"We remain hopeful," said White House spokesman Larry Speakes, who declined further comment.

Meanwhile, several members of Congress who were not included in the White House briefing sharply criticized the administration for refusing to disclose details about its Iranian contacts.

Rep. Dave McCurdy, a senior member of the House Intelligence Committee, said the reported arms-hostage deal would prompt more aggressive congressional oversight of U.S. covert activities.

"I think Congress will put its foot down," the Oklahoma Democrat said. "If the NSC is going to fall under the cloak of executive privilege then they cannot be an implementer of policy," he said, referring to the White House National Security Council, which arranged U.S. contacts with Iran.

The House Intelligence Committee is trying to arrange for an administration briefing on the affair within the next week to 10 days, Mr. McCurdy said.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, Vermont Democrat, said Congress will demand a full explanation once the 100th Congress convenes in Janurary.

Mr. Leahy, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he declined an offer to be briefed by phone by Mr. Poindexter. "I told him I wasn't interested in the kind of briefing that could be had over open phone lines."

Lawmakers across the political spectrum think the reported deal with Iran was "one foul-up on top of another," Mr. Leahy said.

Other lawmakers, however, indicated they would withhold judgment.

A spokesman for Sen. Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said the Indiana Republican was not condemning the White House plan outright because he "believes operations like this may be effective and probably should be closely held."

But the spokesman said Mr. Lugar "does have questions about how this fits into our overall Middle East efforts."

Rep. Henry J. Hyde, Illinois Republican, said he talked to Mr. Poindexter, "but I told him I thought I understood what was going on and I didn't want him to tell me anything. I'll leave it that way until the administration thinks it's time to explain."

Mr. Poindexter, before attending a Capitol Hill dinner last night, said, "We thought all along our policy was correct and we still do." He refused to discuss the hostages or arms shipments to Iran.

Of the four lawmakers at yester-

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day's White House briefing, Rep. Richard Cheney, Wyoming Republican, apparently accepted the administration's explanation.

Mr. Byrd was critical and two others, Senate Republican Leader Robert Dole and House Majority Leader Jim Wright gave no indication one way or the other, said a senior administration official.

In a separate development, former Attorney General Elliott Richardson said he arranged contact between U.S. officials and an Iranian expatriate earlier this year in hopes of winning the release of hostages in Lebanon.

While Mr. Rajaie-Khorassani denied any link between arms and hostages, he left open the possibility that Iran would aid the United States in future hostage situations.

"You know, I think if the United States changes its policy toward the Moslems of Lebanon, toward us, of course we wouldn't mind offering our good offices," he said.

The ambassador also denied reports that Israel had been involved in shipments of U.S. arms to Iran. But he left open the possibility that the arms may have been shipped through Israel without Iran's knowledge.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, interviewed on NBC's "Today" show, declined to comment yesterday on his country's role in the maneuverings.

But he said, "I believe nobody will feel that Israel or the United States is soft on terrorism."

This article is based in part on wire service reports.

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